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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 004958

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SHI'A TECHNOCRAT TALKS OF INTIMIDATION AND CABINET  
FORMATION

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT S. FORD, REASO  
NS 1.5(B) AND (D).

1. (S) Summary. Iraqi Transitional National Assembly (TNA) member and former Minister of Oil Thamir Ghadhban described methods of election intimidation and urged the USG to call on the political parties likely responsible for this intimidation to stop it. He predicted that the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) would get 110-120 seats, with SCIRI's 'Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi as the frontrunner for Prime Minister, although he said former PM Ayad Allawi, if he did well, could become Prime Minister. He said that the next Iraqi cabinet should avoid treating ministries as political spoils and should appoint technocrats, presumably including himself, in key ministries. End summary.

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Widespread Intimidation  
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2. (SBU) Iraqi Transitional National Assembly (TNA) member and former Minister of Oil Thamir Ghadhban, who is not running for the Council of Representatives (CoR), described widespread examples of intimidation in the election campaign, which he said he had heard from his colleagues in the National Assembly and from the Iraqi and Arabic media. He said he had heard that a number of people involved in the campaign were killed in Karbala, and while they were ex-Iraqi Army and ex-Ba'thists, the police officer entrusted with the investigation was shot dead himself.

3. (S) Ghadhban said that Ali al-Dabbagh, a TNA member formerly with the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) who had tried to recruit Ghadhban for his Independent Grouping of Iraq's Competent People List (835), had been supported by two clerics in Najaf, but that both had ceased backing him. One cleric had been bribed, Ghadhban reported, and the other had been threatened and ceased supporting Dabbagh. Dabbagh, who is running lists in the Shi'a provinces, had not a single poster left undefaced in Basrah, Ghadhban said.

4. (S) Asked by PolOffs whether this intimidation was having an impact, Ghadhban said that Allawi had won 150,000 votes in Basrah in the last election, but that he may not get near this amount this time because of intimidation.

5. (SBU) Ghadhban cited methods of intimidation he had heard of through his sources:

- Scaring people not to vote for secular or smaller parties, including by threats of violence against Iraqis who voted for such parties.
- Rigging vote boxes in polling centers under the control of certain political parties.
- Party supporters marking many ballots in the last hour that polling centers are opened but when few voters are present.
- Party supporters opening ballot boxes and adding a mark to votes for leading opposition parties, thereby invalidating such ballots because the voter appears to have voted for two parties.
- Voters lubricating their fingers with petroleum jelly or lube oil before dipping their fingers in ink, allowing the ink to be wiped away so the voters can vote again with the connivance of local election officials.

6. (C) PolOffs drew Ghadhban's attention to Ambassador Khalilzad's statement against intimidation, issued the day before. Ghadhban urged the USG and others to be in touch directly with the top leaders of the United Iraqi Alliance and the Kurdistan Coalition, and that the USG urge the top leaders to order their parties to stop using these techniques. They were undermining the legitimacy of the election and these actions would backfire against the parties that perpetrated them.

7. (C) Ghadhban dismissed Poloff's question whether the message issued in Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani's name, urging the Shi'a faithful not to vote for "dangerous"

(secular) or smaller parties had been offset by the formal retraction issued by his office. He said that Sayyid Muhammad Ridha al-Sistani and others had sent messages to Sistani's network of Shi'a clergy to send clerics out to the villages to make sure they got the message that they should vote for the UIA.

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Ghadhban's Prediction  
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18. (C) Ghadhban predicted that as a result of these tactics, the UIA would win 120 seats. The Kurds will win 55-60 ("they want to be number two," he said). The Sunnis would win 50-55 and the National List (Allawi) would win 30 seats, more or less. Ahmad Chalabi, Sherif Ali bin al-Husayn and Dr. Salama al-Khafaji would win 3-5 total seats, minorities would win 5, and smaller parties would divide the remainder.

19. (C) Ghadhban said a moderate, technocratic government would serve Iraq best, but he feared the result of this election would not be this, but rather a different outcome that would strengthen sectarianism. In such a case, he said the insurgency would subside but it would take a very long time.

110. (C) Moreover, Ghadhban said, if the parties treat the ministries like spoils, this would lead to a very weak government. Far better, he said, to have a strong Prime Minister who would have a major role in selecting his own ministers and who could quickly form a government.

111. (C) Unlike after the January election, when 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Hakim backed down on 'Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi becoming Prime Minister, it was Ghadhban's sense that, this time, 'Abd al-Mahdi would prevail. Ghadhban acknowledged that 'Abd al-Mahdi may not have the votes to prevail over Jafari in a direct contest within the UIA. Instead, Ghadhban expected a backroom deal in which Hakim would argue that Ja'fari had had his chance and that now it was SCIRI's turn. He further suggested that key Da'wa party officials would abandon Ja'fari in order to make it possible for them to hold cabinet posts. (Note: The understanding among UIA parties in January was that the party that got the premiership would not get any other cabinet seats. End note.) SCIRI will see to it that other Da'wa Party officials are offered top ministries, which they could not get if Ja'fari remained as Prime Minister.

112. (C) Ghadhban predicted it would take 2 1/2 months to form a cabinet: 15 days for the election results to be announced, 15 days to convene the Council of Representatives (CoR), a few days to elect a speaker and two deputies, then 2 weeks to elect a President and two deputies, then 2 weeks for the Presidency Council to select a Prime Minister-designate. The Prime Minister-designate would then take up to a month to form his cabinet. He predicted Jalal Talabani would be re-elected President, with a Shi'a and a Sunni deputy, the speaker of the CoR would be a Sunni, and the Prime Minister a Shi'a, most likely from the UIA. If Allawi gets 40 seats, Ghadhban said, this prediction could be upset.

113. (C) PolOffs said that, in the USG view, key ministries like Interior should not be in the hands of militias. Ghadhban said that some "liberal members" of the UIA would accept a Sunni or a Kurd as Minister of Interior. The PUK's Kosrat Rasul 'Ali was someone who was respected, he said. However, in such a case, the UIA would want the Minister of Defense position. There was some desire, he said, for a change in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Strengthening Parliamentary Capacity  
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114. (SBU) Ghadhban, who had served in the TNA but was not running for the CoR, urged the USG and others to consider programs to strengthen parliamentary capacity. "You need to educate and to explain what a federal system is," he said. "It is not a loose coalition of separate regional states." Ghadhban was doubtful federalism would take root outside of the north. "We are still a very centralized state." He criticized the recent decision by the Kurdistan Regional Government to hold inaugural ceremonies at the start of oil well drilling operations north of the Green Line. "The Federal Government must have resources," he said, and "it must be just" to all Iraqis. This could not happen if the Federal Government did not have a voice in natural resource decisions.

115. (C) Comment. Ghadhban clearly would like to return as Minister of Oil, and realizes that by not running for the

CoR himself, he leaves the door open for his name to be put forward by several influential figures, most of all 'Abd al-Mahdi. By aligning politically with independent Shi'a technocrats around 'Abd al-Mahdi -- such as former Minister of Communications Muhammad al-Hakim -- Ghadhban is trying to outmaneuver his chief rival, former and current Oil Minister Ibrahim Bahr al-'Ulum. Within the UIA last spring, the Oil Ministry was "given" to Fadhillah Party, but they could not find a credible candidate, so the portfolio went to Bahr al-'Ulum despite reports of serious corruption in the Oil Ministry in his previous tenure. However, neither Ghadhban nor Muhammad al-Hakim are SCIRI loyalists, and they do not bring anything to SCIRI's campaign for the premiership, which will face tough going if Da'wa hangs together in favor of Ja'fari, Sadr backs Ja'fari against Hakim and 'Abd al-Mahdi, and Fadhillah votes the way Sadr does. If 'Abd al-Mahdi becomes Prime Minister, he may be forced to use Ghadhban and others as advisers in a "kitchen cabinet," influencing policy through the Prime Minister's office, rather than through the Ministries. Ghadhban appears to under-appreciate the need for deal-making to secure the Prime Minister's job for anyone, and to under-estimate the desire by most Iraqi political parties to see ministries as political spoils for the "winners" of the election. If SCIRI uses up one of its chits in the ministerial sweepstakes to put forward Ghadhban as Minister of Oil, other parties may reason that if they cannot control the Ministry of Oil themselves, the next-best outcome would be to have it in the hands of a respected Shi'a technocrat like Ghadhban. END COMMENT.

KHALILZAD